

**Reflections on the First Progress Review Conference
of the
20 Universities in the “Excellence Initiative – Research Universities” program**

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Members of the international panel invited to the first Progress Review Conference of the ID-UB program were very impressed by the progress made by the 20 participating universities. The conference was preceded by an initial reporting by the universities. There is no doubt ID-UB has made an excellent start. We observed a clear mood of change in terms of institutional culture, and acceptance of coherent strategic planning. Further, the outcomes of the recently concluded rector elections have confirmed not only that a transition to a new generation of leaders in Poland’s universities is taking place but also a strong commitment to the excellence program.

It was encouraging to learn both from written materials received prior to the conference and from many panel interventions that thousands of staff and student have been involved in pointed debates and intensive dialogues on ID-UB implementation. Most universities already have been able to establish new transparent internal programs for a large number of their staff, and new research based educational initiatives are under way in spite of Covid-19 lock-down conditions

We have observed a strong sense of purpose and energy in the sector inspired by increased autonomy and accountability under the new Law for Higher Education and the ID-UB program. To reap the benefits from such a positive development, it is of utmost importance that the Government and the universities recognize the nature of higher education and research activities and stay committed to a long-term change program. In this regard we note that the strategic plans presented in the competition for fresh ID-UB resources concern entire institutions; hence, administration of the program must be integrated at the core of university management, and must not be treated as an add-on project (appendix) such as ad hoc larger research projects and medium-term programs. Some of the universities, however, have regarded ID-UB as a “research project” and not as an opportunity to change their entire operation, and not all of the universities have engaged their core resources.

Some very encouraging developments were reported by a range of universities, who reported high levels of engagement within their institutions. There was some variation apparent between the level of enthusiasm displayed by different institutions – though, inevitably, it is difficult in a short conference to differentiate institutional energy from the personality of the sole representative.

In view of acknowledged initial results we would recommend the ministry specifically to observe the following:

- The generally very positive comments made by the “second tier” universities were particularly encouraging. It was interesting to hear from the Rector of one university in this group that their omission from the upper group of ten universities was a “wake-up call” and stimulus to constructive internal discussion.
- It is noteworthy that some of the issues of balance faced by the participating universities are shared with many universities worldwide. For example,
 - What is the right balance between encouraging the retention of the most talented researchers (at all levels) and recognizing the value of inter-institutional mobility, which allows individuals to build a research career based on diverse experiences in different institutions?
 - How is the performance of individual researchers to be assessed in a systematic way without being intrusive and stifling the creativity that underpins all world-class research? (Varying levels of progress were reported; this might form an explicit topic at the next conference.)
- Bearing this in mind, the participating universities should be encouraged to share ideas with international comparator institutions as well as within the group. At least some of the universities have established international advisory teams but it is not clear how widespread this is.
- The introduction of Doctoral Schools appears to have been near-universal. In discussion, the benefits of the approach were well articulated.
- Reported progress towards mergers was highly variable, with the most ambitious referring only to close federations. In some instances, there might be a case for bolder moves. One university made a spirited defense of the benefits of small size, citing the advantage of institutional agility. It is certainly true that retention of agility in larger, more complex institutions is a challenge, but one that is worth meeting if the benefits of broad disciplinary range are to be realized.
- It was encouraging that not too much effort appears to have been devoted to structural reorganisation; rather the focus has been on support of individual researchers. There was very little mention of universities dealing with research areas outside their areas of strength and focus. In advance of the next conference, universities should be explicitly asked to describe how they have addressed such issues.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has, of course, prevented the execution of some of the plans described in the original applications. The anticipated effect on international mobility was widely reported. One university reported the introduction of “e-Visiting Professors”, which suggested innovative thinking. In addition it would be interesting to learn what has been the impact of Covid-19 on the workloads of academics and the balance achieved between research and other responsibilities?
- Although support for early career researchers has been addressed by all universities. international comparisons suggest there is room for further actions. The balance between gaining creative young people and retaining excellent staff is important.

- Surprisingly, no policies were presented to ensure equality of opportunity in support of individual researchers. In particular, what are the policies with respect to parental leave (generally applicable to early-career researchers) and the support of individuals during such leave?

The Initiative motivated the participating Universities to reflect on their governance and the way they support research activities. We have seen promising changes in terms of governance and organization. The goal should be to replace strong hierarchical systems with inclusive teams on all levels. It is really important to include young researchers, international staff and the administrative staff in the responsible teams. In particular diversity perspectives need to be included; most of the progress reports did not cover this point sufficiently. At this stage, it is unsurprising that the progress reports should primarily have concerned the development of plans and the expenditure of money. Future conferences should be expected to focus more on achievements – while recognizing that the full benefits of the most important innovations may not be apparent for a number of years. (This is another example of the need for balance – assessing progress against contestable targets while avoiding an intrusive and self-defeating monitoring system.)

The conference was very well organized and an important step in the process of implementing the Excellence Initiative. The process of the Initiative is well designed by the Ministry. The international panel members encourage the Ministry to continue to accompany the initiative with a non-intrusive monitoring process in which all 20 universities are followed, and brought together for exchange of knowledge and practices. We took note of the open and positive tone of the debates and the obvious optimism among Poland's research universities.

The impact of the Excellence Initiative of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research in Poland is already noticeable in the twenty participating universities and most probably on the whole Polish higher education. This conference provided an excellent mechanism for sharing ideas in a collaborative spirit. While inevitably, and appropriately, there is significant competition between the universities represented at the conference, the spirit of collaboration within the ID-UB program should be encouraged. For this reason, it is important to continue the implementation in a spirit of transparency and inclusion.

We congratulate the Ministry, especially the ID-UB team, and the 20 universities on a successful initiation of ID-UB.

On behalf of the international panel members professors: Ulrike Beisiegel, Simon Gaskell, Sijbolt Noorda, and Jozsef Palinkas, sincerely yours



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